

HOLDING HAPPINESS: MY CANCER STORY

Poems written during Lymphoma Cancer

by

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INTRODUCTION

The poems in this book were written during my experience with diffused large B Cell lymphoma cancer, 2015-2019. They cover the time from when I first knew I had cancer, through treatments at Sloan Kettering in New York City and in remission. Soon after remission, the lymphoma reappeared and I became part of a Memorial Sloan Kettering research project. Again, I gained remission and am thankful that I am still in remission as of today.

When I first found out that I had cancer I began reading as much as I could from the medical perspective and with writings of others who had experienced cancer. These writings were helpful for me to understand what was happening and to provide a feeling of support. In doing this, I found that I needed to document my own experience. Writing poetry is one of my ways and I began writing about what was happening to keep myself afloat during those difficult and uncertain times. Expressing the mixed feelings we experience when we first meet cancer face-to-face, the journey through treatment and then when we are first in remission are aided by expressing them. These are selected poems from my many writings. They reveal my emotions and actions day-to-day during this period of my life. They tell my story in poems.

As I had looked to other's writings for information and solace, I now bring my own to share with you. People tell me these poems have positive meanings for them. I hope they may be helpful to you as well. Perhaps they will encourage you to write your own story.

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HOLDING HAPPINESS: MY CANCER STORY

Poems written during Lymphoma Cancer

STORIES

Our Stories

It is in the telling of our many stories
that we hold our lives both past
and future for the benefit of all.

Stories are the glue of our lives.
They remind us of who we are
They tell us how to live and give us hope.

CANCER ANNOUNCED

It's Cancer

Your eyes open wide
Your mouth cannot speak
Your heart skips a beat
"It's cancer," they say

"Why me?" you now ask
"This wasn't my plan"

But life is insistent
It pulls you aside, whispers,
"Take this path instead."

One Little Cell

One Little Cell
has gone astray.
Who set it wandering
on its way?

There's No Turning Back

There's no turning back
There's no way except forward
You flounder, you tear out your hair
Then you pick up your hiking poles
to climb Cancer Mountain.

CANCER ANNOUNCED (Continued)

Love the Whole

I just realized
that this "mass"
in my abdomen
is part of me
If I love me
I will send love
to the mass as well
because it is me

and I ask it
to love me as well
so whatever is,
is love

How can one resist that
the sequence of events
are what is supposed to be
in the spirit of love.

TREATMENT BEGINS

It's Only A Moment

It's only a moment
It's no time at all

The chemo will come
and the cancer will go

It's only a moment
It's no time at all.

Time has Slowed Down

Time has slowed down
Each moment has its own space
There's no future, only now.

Meeting

Death and time
have not yet met
But when they do
she'll join them
wearing her hiking boots

Well worn maps
float in the wind.
This adventure
needs no maps
It's path unknown.

TREATMENT BEGINS (Continued)

Majestic Cells

Lately I'm studying
the power of my human cells
They are so majestic,
so beautifully creative
even when they want life so much
that they may take it from me.

50 Days

50 days into the news
Cancer controls the scene
Doctors, tears, decisions
But it doesn't own me!

What is that Life Force?

Wherever life begins
there is an unseen force
that causes it to seek life
to sustain and enhance its being
as it ultimately heads
toward transformation

Life is always becoming,
transforming, evolving,
seeking its ultimate perfection,
recreating itself

"We want to live too." says all of creation.
"It is that life force and we want it too."
All seeking life at whatever cost
This mysterious Life Force.

TREATMENT BEGINS (Continued)

Soliloquy Before Dawn

In the darkness before dawn
I rouse from peaceful sleep
My mind is filled with forests of words
My thoughts are open
to the oneness of the universe
Filled with its fullness

In these precious, sacred moments
I see life wanting to live
No longer separate, all is one
The gateway silently folds
quiet stillness abounds
Dawn arises and all that is, is.

I awaken. In this moment
I understand all is perfect
No need to wonder
No need to struggle
Life is complete in its emptiness,
in its fullness
There is nothing more to say

Life in its tiniest form
moves steadily to live its path
seemingly simple or complex,
its progress, rapid or slow
it continues folding and unfolding
Life pursuing its continuity

Cancer cells, too, are merely
life pursuing continuity.
Whatever happens from here on out,
cancer has given me a gift
to complete a fullness of my life
A sacred understanding.

HAIR DEPARTS

Perhaps

Perhaps my hair will not notice
the drip-drop cancer meds
Perhaps my hair's a home body
Refuses to be moved

Perhaps a few stray strands
leave home, the rest will stay to play
A new coiffure for spring they say
So winter'll melt away

"Perhaps." I say with doubtful thoughts,
"Perhaps," I say with hopeful heart
Perhaps a thinning will be fine
A new coiffure to liven the day

But now the mirror speaks the truth
"Perhaps," becomes a distant word
It's gone for now. My hair has fled
completely gone away

I shall not cry I tell myself
But rather laugh with joy
For when you look, you'll see,
"Lymphoma flees with flighty hair."

It's Fleeing

It's clinging to my pillow
it's clogging up my comb
It's flying through the kitchen
It's fleeing out the door

It's dancing in the sunbeams
It's whirling in the breeze
My hair is paving cancer's path
So Lymphoma leaves my life.

HANG IN

Kemo's Kicking In

Kemo's kicking in
Don't like what I see

Hold tight to Spring's dance
We'll weather the storm.

It's Hot

It's hot. It's heavy,
It's swirling out of control
Catch me if I'm falling
We'll make it through the storm.

Had Enough Already!

Had enough already!
This hike's a tough one
Better not to stop and rest
Gotta trudge along, for sure

No sleeping in the snow
No falling in the fog
Just put your best foot forward
Again....again....and again.

Beyond the Fog

Beyond the fog
the sun still shines
Beyond the fog
the trees still dance
Beyond the fog.

HANG IN (Continued)

Chemo Circles Thru

Chemo circles thru
Chemo fills the space
Chemo kicks in
Life is a dream
Swirling, rolling ...

On the Chemo Trail

On the chemo trail
around and up and down
Whirling, twirling
Holding hope.

I Feel Loved

I feel loved
throughout the universe
folding and unfolding
over eons past and future

I feel one
with the wholeness
of the universe
complete in every way

I am at peace.

Go Slow

Go slow
Take it as it comes

This is the moment
The gift of now.

HANG IN (Continued)

What is Death?

We all will die someday
And what is death but a transformation
from that which we know somewhat
to that which we know not at all.
Another adventure
that has no ending, only a beginning.

TOUGH'N IT OUT

Tough'n it Out

The Chemo Trail's a rough one
Steep climbs, rocky beneath
Easy to slip, to fall by the way
A tough climb requires a tough hiker
The goal is in sight
The peak's within reach.
Just keep hangin' in, toughin' it out.

Life Calls Me

Life calls me
Once again
I take my stand
for life with all
of its mysteries
and energy.

Whenever I Lose My Joy

Whenever I lose
my joy for life
and feel boxed in
or limited in action
Life within
diminishes its force
and shortens its hold

Then one day I face
the proposition of death
My true inner belief
in life takes over
I regain momentum
grasp hold again the
uncertainties before me.

TOUGH'N IT OUT (Continued)

In the Moment

In the moment, I am here
and all is well.

My Body

My body smells like death
But I am not dying.

Things Fall Apart

Things fall apart
Things fly apart.
Things come together.

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REMISSION

Chemo'd Cells

Helter skelter
Off they go.

The Last One

There he is
before my waking eyes
the last cancer cell
3 feet above me
dressed to perfection
satchel in hand
hat on his head
turning to wave
and shout, "Bye..."

Elated and stunned
i raise my arm, waving back
"Bye... I'll miss you," I shout
as he vanishes into thin air

"Goodbye creative cancer cells
I love you."

Mirror's Truth

I look in the mirror
and take note
"I have an ancient face."

Remission

A joyous word
A calming word
Remission.

AFTER CANCER

Who Am I?

Again, the same question
Who am I?
Who am I without cancer?
Who was I when I had cancer?
Who was I before cancer?
Who am I now?
What does this all mean?

Thanks to You All

Thank you cells of my body
strong, working hard every day
I know you're here for my health.

Thank you cells who are gone
pushed away by chemo's charm
You did your job and left my life.

Thank you chemo for your part
urging cancer cells to leave
now slipping quietly from me.

Thank you my doctors, nurses
and all who carried me through
Sloan Kettering's research and care.

Thanks to my friends and to theirs
the wide community who surrounded me
with love, prayers and best wishes.

And always, thanks to my family
ever present with love and warm strength
tirelessly supporting me all the way through.

AFTER CANCER (Continued)

Baby Hair

I feel like a new baby
with hair that is growing
for the first time, soft
in its own way covering
my recent chemo-bare head

Everyone wants to pat it
smooth it, feel its soft texture
against their fingers and hands
gaining a peaceful moment
like smoothing a baby's head

And I feel renewed
from their touches,
thankful for healing
and offering my hair
as a solace to others.

This Unease

this unease I feel
it's over but it's not.

After Chemo

Many cells died
and i am alive
but I am changed.

Not Yet

I'm not
who I was
but I've not yet
discovered
who I am now.

AFTER CANCER (Continued)

Yesterday and Today

Yesterday
I believed I couldn't do it
Today
I know I can.

Words Appear

Words appear at the doorstep
of my mind. I gather them up
and write them out
before they disappear
They are my internal teacher
and I listen to what they say.

Cancer's Gift

Whatever happens
from here on out
cancer has given me
a gift to complete
a fullness of my life
a sacred understanding.

AFTER CANCER (Continued)

What Have I Learned?

So this is it
Life and death.
"Death," says
Carlos Castenada's shaman,
"is always sitting on
your right shoulder."
Yep, right there

Maybe his name is lymphoma
Time to rethink my philosophy
Time to review my life

Do I really believe
what I say I believe?
Am I honest with myself?
Have I learned to let go?
Live in the now?
Am I at peace?
Hmmm.

Be Here Now

Be here now
Be not afraid
What is, is
Live it with all your heart
With all your being.

CANCER RETURNS

Let's Live with Joy Right Now

The future's always pending
The past will never return
So let's live with joy right now,
I tell myself as I hope
that last PET scan, tho' suspicious,
is soon declared, "not guilty."

I Love You So Much

"I love you so much," cancer said,
"I can't live without you
so I came back."
"Well," I quickly responded,
"And I can't live WITH you!"

So, I went to SK,
signed separation papers.
"Soon I hope you will be
out of my life for good."
Cancer cried.
So did I, for different reasons.

Crazy World

While I am studying
to learn ways
to prolong my life
My cancer cells need
to learn how to die.

CANCER RETURNS (Continued)

Visible Ink Writers' Group

Strong women, we
writers who share knowledge
spoken or unspoken
that cancer brings

Sisters we, writing
giving joy and hope
inspiration in our
messages to each other
in our selected works
Secrets unfold,
passions expressed
healing our hearts.

Sisters, We

We are sister hikers, we
hiked up Cancer Mountain.
We made it to the top
peered over the fresh
new landscape rejoicing

Now we set out to climb again
This time we know the routine
But the path is rocky and
strewn with difficulties
We hold our hiking poles strong,
keep climbing
We'll make it to the top this time too
Sister Cancer Mountain climber.

CANCER RETREATS

Note to Healthy Cells

Chomp 'em up
Shoo 'em out
Get rid of 'em now.
All those creative
cancer cells
must go at once today!

"No visible Cancer Cells"

I'm wallowing in wellness
Floating in gratitude

Humming with happiness.

The Completed Cycle

Time and the completed cycle
New tests reveal no cancer cells
are present at this time.
We all rejoice and give thanks

The time that it took
seems minuscule now
Looking backward no more
Keep your eyes on the now.

GOING FORWARD

My Body's Adventure

My body seems to be
going on its own adventure--
didn't ask me if I wanted to join in. Heh!
But I'm going along for the surprises
Always ready to adventure.

Go Forward

All that is within me at this time speaks silently,
"Go forward...love, live...this is where you are

Go forward in the midst of life and death
with courage and thanksgiving

Go into the ever and always unknown
revealing itself as you go."

Blame It on Cancer

My walk's just a little bit slower
My hearing a little bit lower

Is it the number of years I've seen
Or the chemo that walked in my path

Let's just say, "Blame it on cancer."
And keep moving on, whatever the pace.

GOING FORWARD (Continued)

Fingers Find Neuropathy

My fingers that danced along piano's black & whites
That tapped out rhythms with keyboards' alphabets
Now jump to the tune of cancer's neuropathy
Sometimes stiff, sometimes aching, always dreaming.

The Whole Universe

We stand alone, yet part of the whole
We are incomplete without the whole
The whole is incomplete without us.

Take It As It Comes

Take it easy
Take it as it comes
Make it, let it, happen
This forever transforming universe.

The Dance

This body's dancing
the dance of life

It whirls and twirls
It stomps and shakes

Glides through the years
like a ballerina on toes

Moves across the stage
'til the music stops.

PS. it's a long piece of
music, so don't panic.

GOING FORWARD (Continued)

All I Have

"All" seems so complete
so fixed and unchangeable
like "always/never, yes/no,"
My inclination is towards
"Sometimes, perhaps
At this time, or maybe."

The things that I have
are those that I do not possess
Unconditional love with family
Support and love of friends
The beauty of nature

My health as it is at this moment.
My own writings and that of others
The magic moments that one
has not anticipated but that
find their way into our lives

It's these intangibles, mixed with
their joys, their own pathos
that propel me,
that give meaning to life
They are what I have

I may waver, but I return again
The barbs of grief may linger
but the heart heals day by day
It remembers its life is worthwhile
It has much yet to give
and much yet to receive.

THE STORY CONTINUES

It's waiting for your story too.

WITH THANKS

Many people have been helpful during this period of my life and I would like to express thanks to them. First of all, to my family. My son, Daniel Pagano who cared for me in his apartment in New York City and my daughter Janice Cragnolin who was there for me from the very first day cancer was revealed to me. Also, my three grandchildren Cody Cragnolin, Amanda Pagano and Theo Gold who always bring me joy.

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ABOUT



Alicia Pagano is a poet, artist and educator who grew up in Unadilla, New York. She received the MAT in Music from Rollins College, FL, and an Ed.D. in Education Administration from The American University in Washington D.C. Alicia has traveled widely and has published and presented her poetry and art internationally. She now lives in her family's home in Upstate New York.

Recent Publications

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Annual Calendars

Whimsical Moments. 2021.

Upcycling. 2018.

Welcoming in 2020.

Walk in Beauty. 2017.

A Community Story. 2019.

Present Transformations. 2016.

